

[By Mike Lillis](#)

Lawmakers seeking a bipartisan deficit-reduction plan to accompany the looming debt-ceiling vote are deluding themselves about the efficiency of Congress, according to the Democrat spearheading the push for a clean debt-limit bill.

Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.), who has emerged in recent weeks as the staunchest proponent of a standalone debt-ceiling hike, said the parties are simply too far apart ideologically to reach a budget deal in time to avoid the market turmoil many fear would attend inaction on the debt limit.

In a sit-down interview with The Hill from his fourth-floor Longworth office, Welch noted the recent fight over 2011 spending took the country to the very brink of a government shutdown. The battle over the long-term budget will be even tougher to resolve, he warned, and thus should be tackled separately from the must-pass debt-limit hike.

"If the leadership thinks it can make progress on some steps that would move us toward a better long-term sustainable budget — fine," Welch said Monday. "But if any of us are candid — and we saw how just the simple question of trying to keep the lights on in the government brought us to the midnight hour — do we realistically think that the gap between the [Democrats'] approach on the budget and the [Republicans'] approach on the budget can be bridged in that period of time?"

Congress's systemic dysfunction was on display last month, Welch charged, when Standard & Poor's revised its U.S. debt-rating outlook from "neutral" to "negative." That move was largely influenced not by fiscal considerations, he noted, but by "a lack of confidence in Congress and its ability to make the compromises that are required to get from here to there."

With that in mind, Welch last month spearheaded a letter urging Democratic leaders to unite behind a clean debt-limit bill. It was endorsed by 114 Democrats. The potential economic fallout of flirting with default, he warned, is too serious to saddle the debt-ceiling vote with politically charged budget conditions.

"This is not a matter of ripping up the credit card; this is a matter of paying off the credit card," Welch said. "And if you don't allow us to do that ... we're basically saying we're going to stiff our creditors."

For almost a century, Congress has set a cap on the nation's debt, allowing the government to issue bonds to fund its deficit spending — up to a certain level.

Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner has projected the government will surpass the current \$14.3 trillion ceiling on May 16. Recognizing the improbability that Congress will act before then, Geithner on Monday told lawmakers he can take "extraordinary measures" to stave off default for several more months. He set the new deadline at Aug. 2.

All sides of the debate agree that Congress will ultimately raise the debt ceiling. The question remains how it will do that.

Republican leaders have insisted that the debt-limit vote be coupled with a strategy for bringing down deficits over the long haul — a sentiment shared by a growing number of Senate Democrats.

"The vehicle upon which something is likely to be achieved to reduce government spending is the debt ceiling," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) told reporters Tuesday. "I don't intend to vote to raise the debt ceiling unless we do something significant about the debt."

In the House, Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) suggested Tuesday that Republicans might stage a vote on a clean debt-ceiling bill just to prove it can't pass — a strategy Welch blasted as a "political stunt."

Rep. John Larson (Conn.), chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, said this week that Democrats are "amenable" to strategies that couple the debt-ceiling vote with a long-term deficit-reduction plan — with a major caveat.

"They just have to be consistent with not touching Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and dismantling the social compact between the American people and [their] government," Larson told The Hill on Tuesday.

Therein lies the trouble, as GOP leaders are eyeing cuts to all of those programs as part of their deficit-reduction plans.

Leaders from both parties, representing both chambers, will meet Thursday with Vice President Biden in the first official attempt to reach a long-term budget agreement.

Welch, a chief deputy whip, doesn't have much faith in a quick resolution.

"The more the clock ticks, the more apprehension you'll start to see in the markets," he warned. "When this happens, it could happen very quickly — and with devastating consequences."

It's not the first time Welch has emerged on the national stage amid a thorny budget debate. In December, he was among the fiercest opponents of the agreement between Obama and McConnell to extend the George W. Bush-era tax cuts through 2012, even for the wealthiest Americans.

This week, he tempered that criticism with a bit of pragmatism.

"It was not a great deal, but it was the best deal [we could get]," he said. "My criticism also acknowledges that the president had his reasons, and we in the House — the Democrats — didn't have the votes."

Welch was also highly critical of the cuts to low-income energy subsidies contained in Obama's 2012 budget proposal — cuts Welch said would "literally freeze" his constituents who rely on them to pay their heating bills.

"A lot of us understood that the president was making a statement," Welch said Monday of that critique. "I respected what motivated the president."

In some sense, Welch's rise to prominence is as improbable as passage of the clean debt-ceiling hike he's lobbying. The third-term liberal is a relative newcomer to Capitol Hill. And the Vermont he represents hardly shares the national political reputation that characterizes many of its New England neighbors.

Yet lawmakers on both sides of the aisle say Welch's emergence is no accident. Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.), a Blue Dog leader who shares a Capitol Hill apartment with the liberal Welch, said his roommate studies hard and uses his experience as a state legislator to great advantage in Washington.

"Peter is a nerd, just like me," Cooper said in an e-mail. "He actually takes the time to read legislation and understand the issues, which has become a rarity in Washington. Coming from state government, where you need to balance the budget every year, he understands the importance of paying for legislation. This has made him a key consensus builder in the House and one of the strongest advocates of fiscal responsibility in the Progressive Caucus."

Rep. Peter Roskam (Ill.), the Republican chief deputy whip, called Welch "a happy warrior" — the rare legislator who "firmly believes in a set of principles" but is also quick to engage the other side.

"When the country looks at Washington, they feel like members are just talking past each other," Roskam told The Hill this week. Welch, on the other hand, "is very engaging."

The bookshelf in Welch's office tells a similar story. It holds volumes by Nancy Pelosi as well as T. Boone Pickens; it boasts the 9/11 Commission Report but also a collection of poems by Rumi, a 13th-century Persian poet and mystic.

Welch is also one of the few Democrats willing to go face to face with Sean Hannity, the conservative — and characteristically combative — Fox News pundit.

Welch conceded Monday that he "got the Democratic treatment" during his recent Hannity appearance. But only by reaching across the aisle, he said, will lawmakers in Washington ever be truly effective.

"A lot of us get in arguments as though it's an ideological battle to be won, rather than a practical problem to be solved. ... That doesn't work for the country," he said. "I hope that we all can take a step back — all of us — and see that there's real advantage to us trying to work together.